

'Camas' had first Washougal PO's



WASHOUGAL postmaster Rex Burton (left) points out the new facilities in downtown Washougal to his guest, Portland postmaster Benjamin Luscher, during grand opening ceremonies in April of this year.

By a quirk of fate, the first Washougal post offices were set up in what is now a part of Camas, more than 30 years before Camas was even dreamed of as a paper mill town.

It was in 1852 that a post office, called Washougal for the river of the same name, was established at present-day Parker's Landing. The first postmaster was a man named Joseph H. Watkins. Nothing is presently known about him. He filed no land claims, and made no future mark in politics. But he had to be a "somebody" and a Whig to have been appointed to the office by President Millard Fillmore.

Watkins lasted about a year. The second postmaster was Hamilton J.G. Maxon, owner of a lumber mill on LaCamas Creek, near where it enters the Washougal River. Maxon's donation land claim became the original townsite of Camas. Watkins probably had the post office in his home. Maxon may have used the mill.

It was in Maxon's first year that the canceling stamp had to be changed from Washougal, O.T., to W.T., for the new Washington Territory that Congress had spun off that year from Oregon.

In 1861, William Kelly became postmaster of Washougal. He served until 1865, when the job went to

Joseph Gibbons. Gibbons lived east of the present townsite of Washougal on a donation land claim, and probably the post office was moved to his home. This

meant that the Maxons and the Parkers and others living near Parker's Landing had to make a long trip on horseback to get their mail — probably once a week. Kelly and Gibbons were the first postmasters to be called "Republicans," a party that was born just before the Civil War.

Gibbons served until 1868, when President Andrew Johnson had the office closed, probably as a post-Civil War "economy move." It then became necessary to go to Vancouver for mail, a chore that would have been rotated among friends and neighbors.

Six years later, President U.S. Grant approved reinstating the Washougal post office, and appointed George W. Hart as postmaster. Hart was a perennial politician. He held about every precinct and county job his neighbors could elect him to, and is mentioned in another article in this historical edition.

Hart had a farm near the present Orchard Hills Golf Course, a long way to go after one's mail on horseback!

At the time Hart was appointed to the newly reactivated post office, H.M.

Knapp of Grass Valley was appointed postmaster of that area, nine years before the wooded Maxon donation land claim would become the town of LaCamas.

In 1877, Benjamin E. Hancock was appointed postmaster. A year later Henry H. Carpenter built a store at Parker's Landing and won the postmastership by providing space for the post office. He sold his store to Joseph E.C. Durgan in 1880, and Durgan became postmaster.

It was during his first year as postmaster that Durgan platted the townsite of Washougal on 20 acres purchased from Richard Ough, built a new store at Second and Main (now 17th and B) and took the post office with him to the new Washougal. The building remained, much remodeled, for 70 years, and was last occupied by a tavern. After 1880, the town had daily mail service by river boat.

In 1889, Durgan sold the store to David H. Gary and the postmastership went to him. Gary Island between Reed Island and the Oregon shore bears his name.

Thomas Sanford Sampson, common ancestor of present-day Sampsons, became postmaster in 1893 and served until '97. He owned a farm on Mt. Pleasant. Sampson moved the post office out of the store to a nearby location on the main street.

It was during his tenure that steamer service was replaced by horse and buggy delivery from Vancouver. This became daily by 1898, and the contract was held by F.H. Smith who performed the chore for

\$530 a year, or about \$1.75 a day! He must have carried parcels or passengers or mail for other small post offices to have been able to make the round trip six days a week for 87 and one-half cents each way.

But the trusty horse was used even before that. In 1886, a contract was let to one D.J. Webster to transport mail from the Washougal post office to the post office at Fern Prairie.

President William McKinley made a change in 1898. He appointed John Herzog postmaster, who immediately moved the office from the Sampson location back to Durgan's store. Herzog probably owned the store by then.

In 1901, Herzog died and C.W. Cottrell, local merchant and flour miller, was named in his place, serving until 1903. Cottrell had had experience working for the department, having been postmaster previously of Mt. Pleasant Skamania County. He moved the post office across the street to his store, at the southeast corner of present-day 17th and "B". Cottrell later started Washougal's first electric light plant.

President Teddy Roosevelt appointed David W. Wright postmaster in 1903, and the office moved to his store on Main Street. Here it remained until 1907, when David W. Hutchinson was appointed, and moved the office to his new general store west of 17th Street from the present city hall. He died on the last day of his term in 1914.

The next postmaster was Charles W. McClure, a Democrat, who served for nine years in a building

across from the present Senior Citizens Center.

Elmer Armstrong, a Republican, was appointed to the post office in 1923, and served until 1936. He had been publisher of the Washougal Record. Armstrong is still living and frequently visits in this area.

The coming of the New Deal put William H. Ruettgers in the post office chair in 1936, and he served until 1939, when he became manager of the Clarke County Savings & Loan Association, now renamed Riverview. Reginald Jones was acting postmaster for a year until the appointment in 1940 of LeRoy McClain who served until his retirement in 1965. During World War II, McClain was in the navy as a chief mail clerk, and R.J. Ross was acting postmaster. City delivery was established in Washougal in 1961.

Rex Burton, the incumbent, was appointed postmaster in 1966. His appointment began a new era of postal service under an independent government corporation removed from partisan politics.

Until Congress passed the rural free delivery law, farmers had to get their mail in town. The first RFD out of Washougal, route 1, started in 1904, with Walter Fitzgerald as the carrier. This was by horse and buggy. The first auto was used in 1923, when Walter Green introduced the "innovation." This route eventually became a big one, serving many families.

Route 2 was started in 1911, with William McBroom the carrier.